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SYRINX

PASTELS OF HELLAS

BY

MITCHELL S. BUCK

ἁδιον ὠ ποιμὴν τὸ τεὸν μέλος ἢ τὸ καταχὲς
τᾶν' ἀπὸ τᾶς πέτρας καταλείβεται ὑψοθέν ὗδωρ

THEOCRITUS

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FOREWORD

One drowsy day of summer, Syrinx wandered in the cool depths of the forest. And there Pan found her, singing and garlanded with flowers.

— Brown-limbed and supple nymph, all the pine-crowned satyrs and the dryads babble thy name. Now even Pan himself desires— thou art very fair . . . I love thee.

But pale Syrinx only smiled in disdain for words too often heard.

The god's quick eyes darkened. He smiled. His ready hand leapt out . . . The frail virgin darted away like a shadow among the trees and over the fields . . .

Her soft lips open to her striving breath, her eyes appealing, the nymph slips over the

flowered bank of a clear stream . . . The waters ripple about her thighs.

— O naiads, help me quickly!

Pan reaches out . . . His arms enfold a thicket of sighing reeds.

Later, he culls the swaying reeds to cut them in uneven lengths and bind them side by side. Then, placing them to his lips, he sighs . . .

The clear notes glide out across the fields. Sometimes they are very sad and men who hear them weep; sometimes they are loud and clear and men who hear them laugh and sing; sometimes they shrill and men draw their cloaks about them, dreaming of singular things.

THE SHEPHERD

When it is night, before the moon has risen and the skies are spattered thick with stars; when, in the distance, all things blend into one and the sleeping earth touches the archèd sky, I stand before my tiny hut and pray.

Below me on the hillside, their coats glowing softly in the starlight, lie my sheep. And from the trees, the brooks, the grasses, the incessant chorus of midsummer nights trills through the air.

Yet I know not to what or to whom I pray. Not to the sun or moon for they are nowhere to be seen; not to the gods for there is no temple

nor even a statue here; not to the stars for there are too many and some, neglected, would be jealous.

Perhaps it is to the sighing wind I pray; perhaps to the shadows and the rolling hills; perhaps to the night itself which seems so peaceful, all embracing, mysteriously divine.

IN THE FOREST

Down the shadowed forest glade, the nymph flashes like a silver arrow from a bow. Her golden hair streams out like a flying veil; her eyes are bright with terror; her crimson, sobbing lips are salt with tears.

Behind her, a dark shadow darting nimbly over the silent earth, a satyr speeds, his cheeks all flushed with red, his clutching hands stretched out.

— Ho, ho, ho! chuckles an old man, leaning upon a staff. Ho, ho, ho! Why dost thou run? Thou wilt be caught! Thou wilt be caught!

High overhead in the sunlight, a bird sings gloriously to the open sky. On the forest path,

a squirrel rushes madly over the grass and scampers up a mossy trunk.

A gasp—quick steps upon the earth—a cry.

— Ho, ho, ho! chuckles an old man, leaning upon a staff. Ho, ho, ho! Why didst thou run? Why didst thou run!

VIRGIN LOVE

I sit before my window drawing the gleaming threads from the distaff—and I wait. Yet even when I see him I am silent, clasping my longing hands over my knees to still their trembling.

Tossing the boyish curls away from his brow, bright-eyed and lovely, how can I hope that he should think of me? How dare I hope that he, so beautiful, should stoop to love?

His voice thrills in my heart; his accidental touch flashes like fire through my veins. And then my veiling lashes droop, I bite my lips

and lay sweet, cooling flowers against my cheeks.

When he looks at me and smiles, I fear him. Yet some day, perhaps, he will hold me in his arms and then—then I will only love him and be very happy.

DELPHI

On the wide green slopes of Parnassus there is a marble temple, a very holy temple in the eyes of men, where a god speaks in a mysterious way.

Purified by the ritual ablutions, clad in spotless white and crowned with laurel, a young priestess, very pale and very beautiful, approaches the dread chasm which opens upon the underworld.

Her flesh quivers at the approaching ecstasy, her breast rises and falls in the divine afflation, her eyes darken with prophecy. How frail she is to be the mouthpiece of a god! . . .

But at length her limbs relax, her head falls forward and, very slowly, she begins to speak.

But I—I love the simple gods of the woods and fields; they are nearer, they speak more gently, and their voice is the song of birds and the murmurings of the night.

THE FRIEND

Surely I dream. It is not possible thou hast really gone. It is not possible that I have lost thee.

From the shadows, I saw thee in his arms above the flower-strewn threshold. And all that night I stood alone under the stars, my hand still clasping the charred fragments of the torch burned for thy good fortune.

The distant rumor of the sea murmurs thy name; the silence of the forests is perfumed with thy memory. Each well-remembered gesture, each fair word, each glance of eyes which understood so well . . .

Thou hast but gone on a long journey, hast thou not? And life ebbs quickly, hand in hand with death . . . But thou wilt return. Before I know the dream is true, surely thou wilt return . . .

LESBOS

Upon the bosom of this sun-kissed sea, beneath fair skies, caressed by gentle southern winds perfumed like enamored sighings, lies the Isle of Dreams.

Its marble cliffs, bright with anemone, fragrant with myrtle, rest like glorious temples on the blue waters. On the flowered grass among the olive groves or shadowed by the pines where lapping waves caress the sandy shore, virgins and youths, inspired with beauty, walk singing, hand in hand.

In the bright cities, laughter fills the air, mingling with pulsing music and fresh voices.

From the altars of the sanctuaries, thin filaments of incense waver out, diffusing through the sunlight.

There Sappho lives to sing of love. There young Larichus, white-limbed and beautiful, pours from the glittering wine cups crimson libations to the gods. And over all, the breath of desire floats like a perfumed cloud.

— Release my arm, O insolent, and give me back that rose thou hast dared to steal!

— I love thee.

— Thou lovest?—beggar! Then look not at me whose love is worth a mina at the least. Away, tattered chlamys, seek thy kind!

— I love thee.

— Ho, friends! Who wants a beggar for a lover? Here is one ready—almost anxious. Look at his faded cloak! Behold this rent

through which I thrust my hand! . . . Ah! . . . Ah! . . . Off with thy rags, deceiver! How wicked of thee to cheat me so! What! What sayest thou?

— I scorn thee.

TO THE APHRODITE

Thou art the source of all the loves; truly thou art very fair. Yet who could say I am not fairer still?

Thy rounded limbs are cold like snow while mine are yielding and warm, glowing with quivering life at a lover's touch. Thy lips which seem so beautiful are white and hard, while mine are like red poppies, tremulous and sweet. No perfumed breath exhales from thee, nor canst thou gasp thine ecstasy into a silenced ear.

Yet I adore thee, for thou art immortal and divine. In the twilight of the sanctuary, thy pure and flawless limbs will glow through the

eddying incense after my own, so beautiful now, have crumbled into dust. Men will look up to thee long after remembrance of me has passed away, and still thou wilt inflame their quickening desire when my frail shade is lost among the dead.

ASHES OF DESIRE

How soft this couch of thine! Beneath my tingling nudity, its glowing silken covers scarcely seem to bear me up . . . Let me lie so awhile, laved in the utter silence of the flesh.

Spread out my hair like waves about my head . . . A moistened tendril clings to my weary lips. Draw it away for me, so that I need not stir even a finger to complete my peace.

How fair these moments—and how dearly bought! . . . Alas! . . . Yet be not

hurt because I call them dearly bought. Thou art a man—thou couldst not understand. Nor couldst thou know I love thee more for them than for all other things . . .

PHAON

Must I woo thee, flower of Lesbian youth, fair-skinned and supple, insensible to love, disdainful as a god? Must Sappho sing to thee and play the man, bringing her sweetest lyrics to thy scornful loveliness?

Among these perfumed gardens where the glowing rose and hyacinth breathe out their fragrant souls, among the tinkling fountains and the olive groves, canst thou not find, within thine heart, one spark of glowing love which I can sigh into a flame?

Alas! Thy brow is icy cold, thine hand all unresponsive to my touch. Thine eyes look far away, in pure content of Aphrodite's gift.

Why wilt thou have it so? Perhaps, in days to come, when Sappho's cithern sleeps and Sappho wanders in the twilight land, men will look back to thee and curse thy beauty that it stilled her song . . . Ah! Phaon!

FALSE DAWN

O friend, I am not She thou seekest. My hair is warm and golden, mine eyes are blue; like hers, my lips are sweet—thou knowest.

But in thine ears my voice echoes like a voice heard long ago which calls thee still across the vast solitudes. The touch of my hand is but the shadow of some past caress which distant memory recalls to thee.

Because I too have loved, I know. And I have seen her image weaving like a phantom through the desire of thine eyes.

Because I too have loved, O friend, search on: I am not She thou seekest.

THE ISLE

How the sea glitters in the sunlight! Far out over the flashing waters, seest thou the white sail of that speeding boat which almost seems to fly above the ripples?

Here on this pebbled beach, caressed by the clear blue waters, where spreading reaches from the lapping waves glide up like the pleading hands of nereids, the gods are very near.

They say, to this lovely island, mighty Zeus, concealed by the semblance of a white bull, bore on his back Europa, the peerless virgin, the source of his desire.

It may be at this very spot they came up from the waters. Perhaps among the grassy dells through which we lately wandered, they also loved. Perhaps in this grotto by the shore they slept, wearied with love, the virgin murmuring through some happy dream, her fair head pillowed on a god-like breast.

THE VOTARESS

For the beauty thou has given me, O goddess, I thank thee . . .

I stand in my marbled bath and see, reflected in the green water, the clear glory of my body, smooth and glowing beneath the caress of my hands. On the streets, I appear in my fairest vestments and costliest jewels. When the passing men turn to look at me, I part my sanguined lips in a warm smile; and each month, at the full moon, O goddess, I lay at thy feet a mina earned in thy name.

Yet neither thy love nor the white poppies of Persephone bring the forgetfulness I crave.

Through the long days when I am alone, I dream of sunlit meadows and crystal streams and, above the noises of the city, the call of shepherds' pipes whispers in my ears . . .

Then I close my door and, weeping, clothe myself in a simple linen tunic which my lovers never see and which is marked with green and red.

AT THE GAMES

Well run, Lysippos! Well run, O gleaming arrow! Artemis herself is not one half so fleet!

(By Zeus! nor half so marvelously agile—that I swear! See how the gliding muscles of his thighs ripple beneath the skin. Behold the slender waist, the broad, smooth bosom stirred by the breath of conflict.)

Ah! The laurel! The laurel to the guide of winds! . . . Ho, Nisos, why limpest thou? Ho, ho! Thou wert outrun a thousand times, thou feigner of accidents!

(No wonder that, when he shows himself on the Agora, even the cheeks of the old men grow pale; no wonder the philosophers cease their windy nothings and gaze abashed . . . But they are all fools! . . . Listen, I will tell thee a great secret . . . It is I he loves! It is I he loves! . . . Ah! . . . By Zeus! he is coming this way!)

THE EPICURE

Go, thou of the golden hair, and bathe thyself in perfumed waters; rub thy body with wine and fragrant oils so thy suppled skin may glow and glide, softer than silk beneath my touch.

Loose thou thine hair above the smoking incense that, being pregnant with the divine fragrance, it may delight me as it falls about my face, over my lips.

Then lay upon thy slender nudity this tunic, these silken scarves and, over all, this purple vestment broidered with fine gold.

When thou hast done these things—return. If thou art smiling, warm with desire; if I find thee fair: perhaps thou wilt be loved.

THE ORGY

— Plunge thy wreath . . . into the wine, as I do. Now drink from the blossoms. It is delicious . . . Ho, there! My friend is thirsty. I am sure he is thirsty. Give him the Cretan wine; he likes it because it is red . . .

— O lassitude! . . . Thy lips are like a flower at my throat . . .

— This roasted fowl, I swear, is dainter than a beautiful woman. Now I maintain that pleasures such as this . . .

— Let her alone, thou ape; she is a Lesbian . . . What is it to thee? . . . Who

threw that cup? O shame! It was a rare Etruscan glaze! How strangely the fragments gleam . . .

— O lovely, glowing limbs! O skin like petals of the rose! More maddening than all wines the fair breath sobbing past thy crimsoned lips . . .

— Gods! Gods! I weep. See, my sleeve is all wet with tears! I can drink . . . no more . . . I can drink . . .

— O Dionysos, strike the profaner dead!

NOCTURNE

Far away, on an island of the sea, lives a woman in a palace of gold. Chains of gold are about her waist, and upon her arms rings of gold and rubies and stones of beryl. All alone she lives, resting by night upon a couch of purple and by day upon a throne of ivory.

They say no one has ever known the warm desire of her lips nor, with a trembling hand, caressed the pliant splendor of her limbs. Strange tales are whispered—she is very fair . . . But once each month when the world is hushed and the round moon gleams high in the heavens, she stands on the terrace of her dwelling. Alone in the moonlight, like a silvery image, she slips from her veils and loosing her

hair from its glittering mesh, lets it float like a deep shadow into the night . . . The warm wind of the south caresses it with a thousand furtive hands and, stealing between the wavering strands, sweeps on, laden with a singular perfume.

Then love starts from its troubled slumber and in the dim temples of Astarte the flowers upon the altars bloom afresh.

THE SEEKER

They asked: — What seekest thou?

And the old man answered: — I seek for Truth.

— I seek for Truth — all other desires are long since dead. For many years, in far lands, before strange gods, my fruitless quest has drawn me on. But in the sanctuaries all is vanity, all is lust for temporal power, all is profaned by the impious hand of man.

— Many have asked: What seekest thou? And at my answer some have laughed while others have eagerly revealed strange phantoms which they worshiped—satisfied. But in the

sanctuaries all is vanity, all is lust for temporal power, all is profaned by the impious hand of man.

Those gathered around him as he spoke, laughed also. But one, standing alone, said gently:

— O friend who seekest vainly, not in shadowy temples but among the fields, beneath outspreading trees, upon the bosom of the waters, lies the occult heart of thy desire. For Truth, alone, does not exist. Seek Beauty if thou desirest peace.

ON THE AGORA

— Seest thou that young man in the white linen tunic with a yellow sash? Look at him well.

— I see him. Who is he?

— He is a poet. His verses are very strange. In them one can hear the sighing of the wind, the murmur of waters, the whisperings of the trees . . . They are very strange . . . But that is not all. Some which I have heard are stranger still . . . They say he has seen the nymphs. They say he has slept in the forests among the satyrs; that Pan himself

once listened from a leafy bower while he sang . . . And when he plays the syrinx, no one can resist him.

— He is looking this way. How strangely piercing his eyes! . . . He is very beautiful. Let us go speak with him . . .

— I dare not. I dare not.

SHADOW GOLD

High on the terrace, the hot night close about me, the starry sky pressing down over my eyes, I lie stretched out upon a couch awaiting forgetfulness which never comes. Crouched on the floor at my feet, a slave girl dreams gently, one slender arm thrown out across the draperies, a cheek pillowed on a hollowed shoulder.

Instead of the sleep for which I long in vain, innumerable visions flit across my memory—gleaming visions of beauty with eyes that gaze at me and hands that beckon . . . I curse them, shadows of joys which never were and, one by one, they fade away.

One vision only never fades as I toss sleepless upon my couch—one vision with golden hair

where once my hands strayed undenied . . . alas! . . . With soft, warm lips where once I drank of immortality—one vision with averted head and white limbs fragrant with another love than mine . . .

I stir uneasily and groan. The slave girl awakes with a whimpering sigh and, raising her head, looks at me with drowsy, questioning eyes.

PAN

These are the forests of Arcadia . . . Knowest thou why they are so fair, why the wind sighs so gently among the trees, why the leaves are so green, the earth so warm and soft, why the fields are bright with flowers and why, from the reeds beside the brooks, strange whispers come?

Knowest thou, too, why the sun shines down so bright by day and why, at night, the moonlight dreams upon the sleeping world, peopling the deep shadows of the rocks and trees with unknown things?

Listen and I will tell thee . . . A god dwells here.

From far away, echoing over the flowering fields, gliding among the trees, hearest thou those limpid notes clear as the love-song of a bird? Hearest thou those pure, sweet notes blending with earth and sky, voicing the subtle spirit of the woods and fields?

It is the god . . . be still and listen.

CIRCE

Bathed in the flooding moonlight, thy golden palace gleams amidst the whispering pines and cypress trees. From the wide open doors, the road winds like a pale ribbon across the fields to the dark line of the shore.

Within thy palace, lamps are burning, harps and citherns whisper and sigh of love; and the laughter of thy guests, the clashing of cups and dishes, echo among the trees.

But thou—thou standest alone, high on the terrace. The moonlight covers thee like a misty veil through which thy jewels flash like living eyes.

How beautiful, how darkly, deadly beautiful thou art! How black thine unbound hair, how

deep thine eyes! How like a spirit of the night as thou standest, with arms outstretched, murmuring strange words above the smoking incense while the hoarse croakings of the frogs, the shrieks of flitting bats, resound like sweetest music in thine ears!

THE FALLING LEAVES

When the sun sets all too soon beyond the mountains and the western skies are flooded with pallid crimson:

When the trees stand naked and black against the afterglow and the evening star shines high above the gathering mists of twilight:

When the earth is chilled by sweeping winds: when the water of the pools lies dead and silent and the last leaves drop, one by one, from the trees:

The naiads forsake the springs, the syrinx of the satyrs is heard no more and the dryads,

deep in the hearts of the trees, whimper and wrap themselves in the shelter of their long, dark hair.

And I—I stand alone in the vast solitude—and tremble.

LETHE

Through the yellow twilight of the underworld, two shadows glided over the asphodel in bloom. At the verge of a leaden stream, they paused.

— Here thou drinkest, said One, and all remembrance will be washed from thee. It is the Law. There is no other way, no other path from life to life.

— I cannot! Oh, I cannot drink! . . . Why must I lose that which is greater than all other things? My heart is filled with memories . . .

— Be brave. In a moment thou wilt not even know thou hast forgotten.

Along the shore, the lotos blooms floated like pale flames; and softly the dark water glided onward, hiding the secrets in its breast.

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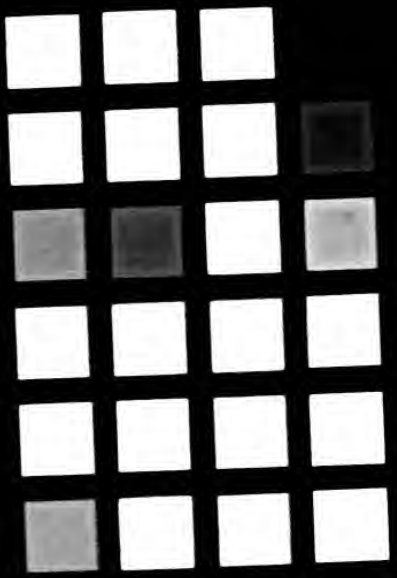
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